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LETTER TO CONVICTS

IN

TWENTY-SIX STATE PRISONS, AND TEN
HOUSES OF CORRECTION,

OR

COUNTY PENITENTIARIES.

"Verily I say unto you, there is joy in Heaven over one sinner
that repenteth."

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LETTER.

Washington, D. C., July 20th, 1848.

I have from time to time received letters from you, transmitted by your officers; and I have also, from many of the chief officers in various prisons, received frequent communications informing me of the improvement of many, and of the general good conduct of all, with but rare exceptions. This is highly creditable to you; it is an evidence, not only of a capacity to improve, but of a will exercised to control evil propensities, and a disposition to cultivate correct views, and to establish good habits. I have not time to answer all your letters severally, but I write to you collectively, not only to thank you for the good sentiments expressed in all letters which I have received, but to encourage you to the difficult though not impracticable task of self-improvement. You are to work out your own salvation; you are to be instant at all times and seasons; to take advantage of every favorable means of moral reformation, and religious instruction. Many of you enjoy that peace which is the growth of sincere efforts after amendment; God has blessed you; he will still bless you, and, while you strive after holiness and newness of life, he will help you, and comfort you, and mercifully give you grace and strength in reaching after your high-calling in Christ Jesus our Lord. Be not weary in well doing; you will experience many discouragements; you will have many trials; you will often hardly be able to see that your path by the new and better course you have chosen, leads to the Heavenly City. Some of you feel

that you have been hardly dealt by:—that your fellow-men have not acted the Christian part towards you; in some cases perhaps they have not: what then? do not increase the hardships of your condition, by cherishing the recollection of grievances or of injuries. If real, forget and forgive them; if imaginary, you are both weak and sinful in indulging such ideas. You must be manly, courageous, hopeful, determined on the right course for all time to come: let the past suffice to have wandered from the right way; he who *wills* to do well cannot but do well. He, who desires improvement, must improve: he, who wishes to prosper, may always prosper: only be faithful, only persevere, be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. If you are tempted, resolve that you will resist the allurements, whatever it be; determine, that through Christ you will conquer, and, rely upon it, you will be victor in the struggle.

I am sorry for you, sorry for the troubles to which I often find you subject: but it is not sorrow, that you are for a time held under restraint; that you are no longer free to go and to come, from place to place; that you no longer possess the privileges of citizens; and no longer have opportunities of social converse, and free companionship. No, these are privations, they are severe privations, but of how little consequence when compared with the moral condition in which you have, oftener by weakness, than by great and wilful determination to sin, placed yourselves. The great evil, which I am sorry for in relation to your lot, is that you have put off wholesome habits; that you have removed yourselves far from God: that you have injured not only your temporal condition, but endangered your immortal safety. You can, thanks be to the All-Merciful, you can retrieve these errors: you can, like the prodigal of the Scriptures, re-

turn to the Father. In this return, you will find great peace and consolation; you will pass the residue of that period which keeps you in seclusion, in preparation for filling well, when your enlargement comes, your station as friends, as members of families, as neighbors, as citizens. The sentiments, embraced in the following lines, written by a repentant convict, contains the spirit of that concise but touching prayer of the publican: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." They show too, that the writer had commenced his work rightly and well: may you all have grace to do the same,

"To God, my Father, I will go,
And daily bend the humble knee;
And seek his aid to heal my woe,
And keep me from temptations free.

"And if these erring feet should tread
Once more upon the world's broad stage,
I'll strive to earn my daily bread
Through precepts in the sacred page.

"I'll strive to do by other men
As I would they should do by me;
And God will make me happy then,
And from a prison keep me free."

I wish to guard you from an error into which many well-intentioned persons fall: it is the fancy, or the belief, that in their own conversation, in their own amendment, in their own attainments in goodness, they have a very small part to perform: they have but little to do: all, according to their idea, is to be wrought for them by some mysterious, superhuman influence, of which they entertain but vague ideas, but meanwhile they remain passive, waiting for some signal change. How it is to come, or what it is to be, they have no definite notion. Now, friends, it is as sensible and consistent to expect

the hands on the dial of a clock to indicate the true hour of time, when the pendulum is motionless, as it is to expect progress, either in temporal or spiritual concerns, without corresponding daily and hourly diligence ; without action and effort both of body and mind. *God helps him who helps himself*: quickening influences are imparted only when the heart is prepared to receive them: good resolves are strengthened and blessed only when brought out in good deeds. *Toil*, and *hope*: clouds do not always darken the sky: night is succeeded by the cheerful morning: no really great or important good is attained instantaneously and spontaneously: it is persevering, daily labor, for days, and weeks, and months, that affords to the husbandman the rich returns of the harvest. See how it is in the shops where you work each day ; nothing is effected, nothing made complete but by a succession of mechanical movements: the staves in the cooper's shop do not place themselves into barrels by a single stroke of the instrument in your hand ; the iron does not take its shape in the forge, nor does a single movement of the loom produce the finished web ;—

Link by link the chain is made,
 Stave by stave the barrel stayed ;
 Patient each single thread is cast,
 Till warp and woof are web at last.

So it is with character, with habits, with piety: so with all temporal success, all spiritual attainment. Be patient therefore, be courageous: if you do not see the end, that all you covet is before you, all you strive for in nearness of possession, do not falter. You *cannot* always be subject to disappointment. Like "Murad the unlucky," you will be in difficulties if you leave your affairs to chance, or if you conduct them indiscreetly. "Like Murad the lucky," you will find yourselves prosperous when

all you undertake is commenced and carried forward with a good spirit, patiently and perseveringly.

Watch well your habits. Avoid in future that common and so fatal sin, excessive use of intoxicating drinks; in fact avoid the use of such altogether: this vice has been the ruin of thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. How many of your number have owned, with bitter lamentations, that intemperance has been your ruin. How shocking is the sight of a drunkard! One of God's creatures; a being destined to live for ever, whose soul cannot die;—how shocking is it to see such the victims of self-indulgence; that self-indulgence which assures destruction when pursued! How terribly legible on the countenance of the poor, frail drunkard are traced the lines of sin and misery! A man become a brute; a rational being debased to idiocy! The bloated figure, the palsied, quivering limbs, the vacant stare, or the infuriated, restless, ungoverned spirit; the desolate, cheerless home; where, consorted in grim company, are sluggishness and poverty, and disgrace, and every form of distress. How does the spirit deplore such ravages, where content, and honest confidence, and peace might have their habitation! But these are not the greatest evils; here are not the whole of life's great sorrows and low degradations: Oh no! these outward signs are but the significant representatives of a sin-struck soul; of a mind debased; of a man who should honor himself, his neighbor, and his God, brought down to worse than brutish life. Then the sad eye wanders beyond this temporal state. Then is a fearful desolation sweeping like a tornado over the soul. There, in the path of the fell destroyer, is seen not only poverty, disgrace, evil passions, baseness and crime; but *there is a soul in ruins!* there, sullied and crippled, lies that which was created

in the image of God, and destined to a happy immortality ; there it lies, on the very verge of perdition.

“ There is a death, whose pang
Outlasts this fleeting breath ;
Oh what appalling horrors hang
Around the *second death*.”

Kneel, kneel down and thank God, in the fulness of a boundless gratitude, that you are spared ; spared for repentance, for recovery, for restoration ; spared to prepare the soul for its eternal, future life.

But I must pass from this subject ; I would add a few words upon your use of the means of improvement while you are in prison, These are various. But first of all you must feel that you have erred ; that you are wrong ; that you need conversion to a better life. Men are very apt to ascribe all their misfortunes and vices to the influence of others, rather than to their own want of firmness, and will to think and do what is right. Having admitted that you need improvement, apply such means for attaining it as are within your reach, God never deserts those who are truly earnest in this work ; pray to him daily for assisting grace : read your Bible : especially study the life, the example, the precepts of Jesus Christ. He who is ‘ the way, the truth, and the life,’ will aid you to all truth. Learn self-control ; no day will pass, even within the prison-walls, when the monotony of life will not be assailed by temptations often difficult to repel. Be kind to all ; submit to discipline ; do what good you can by a good example. Avoid recurrence, both in thought and speech, to the sins and sinful practices of days gone by ; the mind loses power to reach after, and a desire to seek for better things, when it gives itself up to such contemplations, or when the habit of rehearsing bad exploits, is indulged. Most of

you have access to well chosen books of sufficient variety to afford you the means of such assistance and instruction by diversion of thought, renewing the memory by varied subjects well illustrated, and adding stores of new ideas. You have volumes upon subjects of general knowledge, and books of special religious instruction, and I know that a very large number of those, who will read this letter, enjoy and profit from the use of their prison libraries.

I have, in the hope of assisting your devotional exercises, prepared for your use four prayers, which you will find attached to this letter. I wish to write much more, but cannot at present refer to many subjects which are suggested by your communications, and by my personal knowledge of your circumstances in prison. Do what you can: God requires of his children no more than he gives them time and ability to perform. Those who possess but one talent, are not expected to render the returns which five talents should produce.

I have only time now to add sincere expressions of hope in your continuance in well-doing. Be encouraged to go on in a task so well commenced, and the God of peace sanctify you wholly, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I quote a few lines, reflecting a right spirit, written by a convict in prison.

“Some sober scheme I'll studiously enforce,
And, self-repenting, tread in virtue's course.
To thee, Great God, whose piercing eye can dart
Through the dark windings of the human heart,
To thee I pour my supplicating cries,
For thou art yet as merciful as wise.
Oh deign, from thy ethereal throne to hear
The invocation of a soul sincere ;
And, since thy goodness has allowed me time
To see my error and repent my crime,
Oh grant an earnest of eternal day,
Nor cast the prostrate penitent away.”

I repeat to one and to all of you,—be of good courage ; be faithful in self-examination ; be earnest to improve, and you will go forth from the prison, and its weary restraints, thankful to God that you have been arrested in your thoughtless career. You will go forth to do good to yourselves, and to your fellow-men, and to serve the merciful Lord who has spared you to show forth the excellence of a good life. I shall always be glad to hear from you, and of your well-being. Farewell.

Your sincere well-wisher,

D. L. DIX.

PRAYERS.

I.

“ He that has all his own misdeeds confessed,
Stands next to him who never has transgressed.”

GREAT and most merciful God ! thou to whom Jesus has taught all suppliants to approach, as children to a Father, I acknowledge my unworthiness to be called thy child. I have offended thee ; I have not loved thee, my great Benefactor ; I have not served Thee, who hast a right to require of me a godly life. I have injured my fellow-men. I have debased myself by crime and sin. But, O God, in the Scriptures of Truth, man is taught that thou dost forgive all who sincerely repent and turn from the evil of their ways, humbly confessing their faults, and purposing hereafter to lead lives conformed to thy laws, and to go in the way of thy commandments. I pray thee, O Almighty Lord, pardon mine iniquities, and cleanse me from my sins. Renew a right spirit within me ; make me to know the comforts of thy grace,

and henceforth, thy spirit assisting me, I purpose to lead an upright, obedient, and pious life. I will strive to make amends to those who have been injured either by my acts, or by my example. I will strive to live more worthy of thy favor. I will study to make the Lord Jesus Christ my example, and I will be earnest to learn his precepts. Be pleased to hear and accept my imperfect petitions in the name of Jesus thy Son. Amen.

PRAYER II.

“Why shouldst thou thus take care of me,
A weak and sinful man,
Who have refused to render Thee
The little good I can?”

“Unworthy to be called thy child,
I come with shame to Thee,
Father! oh more than Father, Thou
Hast always been to me!”

“Forever blessed be thy name
For all that Thou hast done!
I pray that Thou wilt pardon me
Through Jesus Christ, thy Son.”

LORD of Heaven and earth, thou hast mercifully preserved me through the past night, and I live to thank thee for renewed opportunities of penitence and improvement. I thank thee for health, for strength, for reason to understand thy will and thy laws, and for the mind to learn them aright. Wilt thou be pleased to grant me the help of thy Holy Spirit, that I may resist the temptations and sins which beset my thoughts and life. I would henceforth forsake what is evil, and cleave to that which is good. Hear me, O Lord, for Christ's sake. Amen.

PRAYER III.

"Save thou a penitent, O Lord !

Whose hope still rests upon thy word,
Who seeks for some kind promise there,
Some sure support against despair.

"Search, gracious God ! my inmost heart,

Thy light, thy peace, thy grace impart !
From sin and error set me free,
And guide me safe to Heaven and Thee."

OH Lord, Creator of all worlds, the Maker of all mankind, I humbly beseech thee of thine infinite goodness to have pity upon me in my low estate. I have sinned and done evil in thy sight. I have grievously offended against thee. I pray that thou wilt regard me in compassion, rather than in deserved anger ; pardon my transgressions ; help me to do thy holy will, to keep thy righteous laws, to lead henceforth a godly and sober life, so that others may take knowledge from me that I no more follow after sinful indulgences, and that I no more am guilty of a life of crime. I pray for all my relations and friends, for all whom I have brought to grief and trouble. Spare my life yet longer that I may repair the evil I have done in the world. Spare me yet, O Lord, a little longer, that I may prove the sincerity of my repentance, that I may show forth the influences of a godly life, and of a pious spirit. O, gracious God, hear my imperfect prayers, offered through Jesus Christ, thy Son, Amen !

PRAYER IV.

“ Amendment’s vow, repentance’ tear,
 Presumption humbled in the dust ;
 These, to thine altar, Lord, I rear,
 With fervent prayer, and filial trust.

“ Like mariner without a chart,
 ’Mid seas of doubt and death I roam ;
 O God, the light of faith impart,
 To guide the darkened wanderer home.”

ALMIGHTY Lord, thou whom I have offended in thought, in word and in deed ; thou whose righteous laws I have transgressed ; I pray thee, of thy great and infinite mercy, to look upon me with compassion, and, though unworthy to take thy sacred name upon my lips, I beseech thee to listen to my supplications. I have offended against Thee ; I have done many things I ought not to have done ; and have left undone many things I ought to have done. O Lord God of righteousness, pardon my offences, and blot out my sins. Renew my heart ; make me profoundly sorry for sin ; may my repentance be sincere. Help me to frame good resolutions, and to practise them : Help me to subdue my evil passions, and neither to speak, nor think, nor act ill toward any of my fellow-men. Help me, O God most holy, through Jesus the Exemplar, and Teacher, and Saviour, to attain to goodness of heart and pureness of life. I am unworthy of the blessings thou dost bestow—unworthy of thy long-suffering, and of thy sparing mercies,—but I humbly crave thy protection and thy blessing, in and through Jesus Christ. Amen !